

The Burden of the Passion

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It is mildly amusing to see scholars who in their own quests of the historical Jesus pick and choose from among the four Gospels criticize Mel Gibson for doing the same in "The Passion of the Christ." It is less amusing to see scholars accuse Gibson of reading the Gospels through the contra Iudaeos tradition when these scholars themselves read his movie through that same tradition. Of course, they think the movie gives them good reason to do so. But Gibson likewise thinks the Gospels give him good reason to read them thus. Is it correct, then, to interpret "The Passion of the Christ" as laying a burden of guilt on the Jewish people?

The persecutions that Jews have endured throughout the centuries make that interpretation of the movie understandable, and the interpretation contains an element of truth but neither the whole truth nor the fundamental truth. Yes, the movie portrays Jewish leaders as responsible for Jesus' arrest and as hauling him to Pontius Pilate and demanding Jesus' crucifixion. Yes, the movie portrays a Jewish mob as joining in the demand. On the other hand, the rabbis' own Talmud accepts Jewish responsibility for Jesus' death by changing crucifixion into stoning, a Jewish rather than Roman method of execution, followed by a hanging of the corpse (b. Sanh. 43a, 67a; y. Sanh. 7:16). Moreover, the Apostle Paul, an outstandingly earnest Jew prior to his Christian conversion, blamed the Jews for Jesus' death (1 Thess 2:14-16, a passage sometimes disputed but usually considered genuinely Pauline); and it is hard to imagine why according to his own account (Gal 1:13, 23; Phil 3:6, passages universally accepted as authentic) Paul persecuted the church "exceedingly" and "zealously," were it not for Jewish complicity in the death of the one in whom Christians believed. Paul's writing before the Jewish rebellion against Rome in 66-73 CE undercuts the view that to distance themselves from the Jews, Christians started blaming them unhistorically for Jesus' death not till after that rebellion.

Though Satan moves among the jeering Jews in Gibson's movie, other Jews—not Simon of Cyrene and Jesus' mother and disciples alone—sympathize with Jesus. And Satan moves not only among Jesus' Jewish enemies but also among the Roman soldiers as they beat Jesus mercilessly. Someone will say, however, that Gibson portrays the Romans and those Jews alike as cardboard characters; that is to say, he caricatures them. Precisely the point! They are Satan's tools, for human beings would not commit such horrors apart from demonic influence. Even disbelievers in Satan must sometimes wonder at the mystery of human evil.

As for Pilate, he is known from outside the New Testament to have been cruel. But we also know from outside the New Testament that he yielded to Jewish pressure on at least one occasion earlier than Jesus' trial (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.55-59; *War* 2.169-74). Pilate's position was precarious; for in the past, complaints by Jewish leaders against a predecessor, Archelaus, had led to Rome's deposing that predecessor (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.342-44; cf. Strabo 16.2.46), and Pilate himself had complaints lodged against him (Philo, *Embassy* 299-305; Josephus, *Antiquities*

18.85-89), the latter of which led to his own deposition. So he had reason to get the jitters and cave in. And since he did cave in despite his belief in Jesus' innocence (all the foregoing and following according to the movie and the Gospels, of course), he himself does not look innocent in the least. Rather, he looks all the more guilty for giving Jesus over to crucifixion against his better judgment. Because of his knowing injustice and the Roman soldiers' unspeakable brutality, Gentiles share with Jews an equal burden of guilt.

But in this movie neither the Gentiles nor the Jews do the fundamental burden-bearing. Jesus does. The quotation of Isaiah 53 in the opening frame provides the interpretive key to the whole movie. This quotation reads in part that the Servant of the LORD "was crushed for our iniquities" and that "by his wounds we are healed." To the contrary, Satan tells Jesus in the opening scene that "one man" cannot "bear the whole burden of sin. . . . It is far too heavy." Will Jesus succeed in doing what Satan told him nobody can do? Here is the question the movie seeks to answer. At bottom it is not a question of how much or little blame for Jesus' death rests on the backs of Jews or of Gentiles, whether past or present. It is a question of Jesus' ability to bear the sins of all humanity on his own back in order that human beings may be unburdened of their sins.

In this light, the nearly interminable beating of Jesus does not have the look of gratuitous violence in the sadomasochistic mode. Not at all! Its very length and brutality are designed to test the ability of Jesus to carry "the whole burden of sin" and prove Satan wrong. Unbelievers may not like this theology. It may disgust them. But believers or not, reviewers only expose their theological insensitivity to call the violence inflicted on Jesus "gratuitous." "The Passion of the Christ" gives us to understand that it is the forgiveness of sins made possible by the violence which is gratuitous, not the violence itself. And the palpable exhaustion of the Romans who beat Jesus stands for the exhaustion of all human guilt on his body. As an old gospel song puts it, "Jesus paid it all."

Right among Jesus' closest disciples there is guilt to be paid for. They forsake him. Three times Peter denies him. Under Satan's influence Judas Iscariot betrays Jesus. Gibson's portrayal of Judas and Satan displays special sophistication. The Gospel of Matthew has Judas throw back to the chief priests the thirty pieces of blood money they had given him for the betrayal, but does not have them throw it to him at the time of bargain. But in a fine artistic touch Gibson does have them do so to form bookends out of a throwing to and a throwing back. In each throwing the coins scatter on the floor; and Judas's scooping them up when they are thrown to him betrays his greed in the betraying of Jesus for a paltry sum. But boyish demons drive Judas to suicide, so that Satan holds aloft the soul of Judas as a trophy in the form of a warty, hairy baby-albino to represent disembodiment and hideous to represent Satan's disfigurement of a human being who had been made in God's image (compare and contrast El Greco's portrayal of the departing soul of the godly Count Orgaz).

Satan has a comeuppance too. When Jesus dies having successfully borne the weight of the whole world's sin, Satan collapses on the site of Jesus' death-and shrieks. Why? Because that is what demons do when exorcised, when cast out. Shortly before his passion Jesus said, "Now is the prince of this world cast out." Exorcistic language if there ever was such! Satan has had his/her day; but thanks to Jesus'

burden-bearing, that day is over.

The treatment of Herod Antipas, to whom Pilate sent Jesus and who sent Jesus back to Pilate, exhibits Gibson's artistry-and homework as well-at its most subtle and thorough. The drunken feast that Jesus' entry interrupts recalls the drunken feast at which the severed head of Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, was served to Herod on a platter. Herod's wife Herodias is present here as she was present there. But Herod wears a woman's wig and mascara. Why this womanish portrayal of him despite his heterosexual marriage? Well, it was Herodias who manipulated Herod against his will to have John the Baptist beheaded. To represent her dominance over Herod, Gibson makes him effeminate. There is more. On his way to Jerusalem some Pharisees had said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." But Jesus answered, "Go tell that fox for me, Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. . . . It is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem" (Luke 13:31-33). The Greek word behind "fox" is feminine, so that Jesus is calling Herod a vixen, a female fox-not an animal to be afraid of or to run away from. Gibson matches Herod to Jesus' slur.

"The Passion of the Christ" opens with Jesus standing beside a tree in a garden called Gethsemane. Not as in the Gospels, Gibson puts a temptation of Jesus in that garden and by this means recollects for us the original temptation beside a tree in another garden, the one called Eden. A succumbing to that original temptation led to expulsion, debarment from the tree of life, and death. Jesus' resistance of temptation so as to bear the heavy burden of humanity's sin on another tree, the cross, opened the way back to the tree of life, eternal life.

Lest theologically superficial reviews of this movie, whether critical or supportive, contribute to an anti-Semitic misuse of it, let us all treat it more perceptively than some have thus far been equipped or disposed to do.

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